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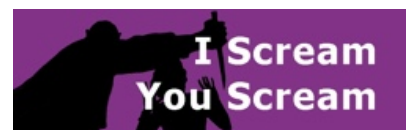


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Reviews

TELL IT LIKE A WOMAN – Review by Jennifer Green

February 21, 2023 Jennifer Green Anne Watanabe, Cara Delevingne, catherine hardwicke, compilation, Diane Warren, Eva Longoria, Jacqueline Fernandez, jennifer hudson, Lucia Puenzo, marcia gay harden, margherita Buy, Maria Sole Tognazzi, Mipo Oh, taraji p. henson, Tell It Like a Woman, We Do It Together

Tell It Like a Woman is a compilation of seven feminist short films that boast some excellent performances and undeniably important themes. But what could have been a collection of amazing female-focused films from all over the world is instead a heavy-handed message capsule, making it ultimately a disappointing venture despite a few highlights.

Marketed around its concept of stories by and about women, the film was co-produced by the non-profit organization We Do It Together, which promotes gender parity in film and media. The stories mostly revolve around women in crisis, which provides narrative drama but doesn't feel universal or representative of women's lives in general. While there's plenty of diversity across the shorts in terms of race, ethnicity and

nationality, the focus begs the question of why the film didn't opt for more diversity in stories and tone. Being a woman doesn't have to mean overcoming constant crises, does it?

Another problem is that the feature opens and closes on its weakest films, burying the most engaging three shorts in the middle. It risks losing viewers right off the bat with an overly scripted and awkwardly staged drama starring Jennifer Hudson as an incarcerated mother with past trauma, substance issues and mental health problems. It's a lot to get across on screen. Hudson commits fully to the role, but actress-turned-director Taraji P. Henson undermines her work by inserting a second Hudson as her negative inner voice to explain what first Hudson is thinking and feeling. It wasn't necessary and it's a little hard to watch.

Hudson's character in *Pepcy & Kim* is based on the real-life story of the woman who started the non-profit Time for Change Foundation. Likewise, the second film in the collection is based on a real doctor who aides the homeless and vulnerable in Los Angeles. The doctor is played by the always-authentic Marcia Gay Harden. The plot of the short film revolves around her peeling off layers and layers (and layers) of clothing from a schizophrenic homeless woman, played by Cara Delevingne.

Elbows Deep has the makings of an interesting story, and there's tension in whether the homeless woman will allow herself to be cared for or whether she'll lash out. Director Catherine Hardwicke (*Twilight*) relies heavily on close-ups of the women's faces to craft that tension, but in the short film format there's not enough time to develop either of the characters or give the story more depth.

The third film in the collection is the most interesting and most artfully crafted, both in terms of story and mise-en-scène. Directed by Argentina's Lucía Puenzo, the film stars Eva Longoria as a successful businesswoman who has traveled home to Lagonegro in Italy for her sister's funeral. It turns out her sister, like their mother before her, has committed suicide. And she's left her daughter in Longoria's character's care, though the two have never met before. The Italian lakeside village is captured in memorable light and shadow, and Longoria offers what may be the most focused, believable performance of the collection.

This isn't the only film in the compilation to tackle motherhood. In the *Italian Unspoken* from director Maria Sole Tognazzi, Margherita Buy plays a veterinarian who helps a woman escape an abusive partner. The more interesting sub-story in this film is the guilt Buy's character feels for missing a dinner with her daughter to do her important work, and despite the fact that her absentee ex-husband will be there (and appearing like the more devoted parent). Buy conveys that mother's guilt and resignation in few spoken lines, and one hopes her daughter also understands her mom's unspoken valor.

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Similarly, Anne Watanabe also has little dialogue as the overworked single mother of two young children in Mipo Oh's Japan-set *A Week in My Life*. This is the sweetest film in the collection. It's also a well-crafted and -edited storyline that fits a full narrative arc in the short film format. That's not the case in the collection's Indian film, *Sharing a Ride* starring Sri Lankan actress Jacqueline Fernandez. This is an at-moments surreal tale that might be trying to evoke Fellini but comes across as disjointed, confusing and even jarring at moments. The final film is a short, animated story that feels superfluously tacked on to the rest of this live-action collection.

One key success for *Tell It Like a Woman*: its theme song, *Applause* by Diane Warren, is nominated for a Best Original Song Oscar.

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Jennifer Green

Jennifer Green is a regular contributor to Common Sense Media, The Hollywood Reporter, The Seattle Times and The San Francisco Chronicle. She was Screen International's correspondent in Spain for ten years. She launched the newspaper column and website *Films from Afar* to curate international films available for home streaming. She has served on film festival juries across Spain and North Africa and teaches journalism and film to university students.

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